

# ZABALAZA

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James Kelman  
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23rd August 1993

Dear Jim

We are organising a conference on Literature entitled **Testaments: Writers at the Cross-roads** in London on 6th and 7th November and would be pleased if you could take part.

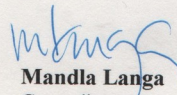
The conference is divided into four sections and involves some well-known writers. The enclosed provisional programme gives details of the topic titles. We would like you to present a paper in the section - Language and Literature as Mirror or Lamp. A Writer in these times: A responsibility.

We are requesting the participants to prepare written papers for documentation purposes and possible publication.

For further information please contact me on 071 837 2012 or Pitika Ntuli on 071 249 8490.

We hope you will be able to take part and look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely

  
**Mandla Langa**  
Co-ordinator





PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

Testaments: Writers at the Cross-roads

Topics and Times:

SATURDAY

10am Opening: Setting the Context

10.15 - 12.15 1) Writers are the Custodians of Memory

12.15 - 1.30 Lunch

1.30 - 3.30 2) Language as the Shuttle between opposing worlds - Beyond Binaries

4.00 - 6.00 3) Language and Literature as Mirror or Lamp  
A Writer in these times: A responsibility

6.00 - 7.30 Dinner

7.30 Concert - Night Rhythms

SUNDAY

11.00 - 1.00 4) Writings from the Edge; Writings from the Inside

1.00 - 2.30 Lunch

2.30 - 4.00 5) Oppression is the mother of metaphor (Jorge Luis Borges)

4.30 - 6.00 READINGS / CONFERENCE SUMMARY

## THE NEED FOR CRITICAL CONTEXT

CAM  
TRANSMISSION

CENTRE WHERE MUSIC OCCURS

FEB GLASGOW CONFERENCE

DANCE  
VISUAL ART  
WORKSHOPS LITERATURE  
CRITICISMSnationalism  
social realism

anything

MIRROR OR LAMP — MAINT STATEMENTS ON FICTION

is a red herring / ~~these~~ critical terms and should be applied by critics in a ~~critical~~ critical context. It is misguided that writers use this language but unfortunately we are often drawn into it. Writers/artists have a different language from the purely critical but too often get drawn into critical stuff.

So often becomes: THE KIND OF WRITING WE WANT: which in turn leads to THIS IS THE KIND OF LITERATURE YOU WRITERS SHOULD BE WRITING — PRESCRIPTION, SUPPRESSION, CENSORSHIP, FUNDING, AS REPRESSIVE STRUCTURE

BRING IN TOWARDS CONCLUSION OF ANC PAPER

WE ASSUME WRITERS WANT TO DO THEIR BEST. → WE CAN ULTIMATELY ONLY WRITE ABOUT OF THE REALITY BEING MEN AND WOMEN, BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT WE ARE — OF, FROM AND ABOUT

→ AN ARTIST-BASED CRITICISM

MIRROR idea is typically applied by these — including critics — who have little or no experience in creating art

universal - relativism — NKOMO, GORDIMER a-priori  
critical is always past/reflective as the artist has choices  
universal must always be a possibility, otherwise how else do we read? we read as strangers to a culture but not as alien beings; we are always human. But we are perhaps talking only about greatness

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LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE AS MIRROR OR LAMP:

A Writer in these times: A responsibility

ref to CAM, Artists in Solidarity, an artist-based criticism ( a new breed of critic (Belinski [Nabokov p99], universalism > relativism; immediate distinction between writers; prescription

There are at least two kind of writers; those who are artists and those who are not artists. I have argued this elsewhere so won't dwell too much on distinguishing features but that examples I used, on the writers who are not artists, I place people like Jeffrey Archer. Not simply because they are right wing. In fact it is certainly not because they are right wing. I'm on the side of Nabokov here, that we should and must be ready to acknowledge the art of writers like T.S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, Evelyn Waugh and Joseph Conrad. We have to accept that it is possible for people who are openly sectarian, openly racist, to also be artists. This impinges on a point I shall be returning to, the need for a different criticism. If there is one thing that our movement is in dire need of, it seems to me, then it is a new breed of critic. It is possible that what happened to Salman Rushdie, what is still happening to Salman Rushdie, would have gone in a slightly different direction. I'm aware that this is a fairly large claim to make. However, I make it. By paying attention to the actual work created by Rushdie it can be shown that his use of stereotype indicates certain prejudices that are based on elitist assumptions in regard to race and class. No writer's work is beyond criticism. Unfortunately, the dire state in which literary criticism stands at present has the result of silencing those who would wish to approach contemporary writing in an honest way. It is no contradiction to state that had an honest and critical appraisal of Rushdie's SATANIC VERSES been

brought into the public arena then the voices of prejudice raised against him would have had far less leeway, there might have been fewer attacks on the man, and certainly those attacks would stand revealed either as themselves grounded in prejudice, or simply as ignorant. I speak here as someone whose work has also been attacked. But it so happens that the attacks were fairly quickly shown to be lacking in any critical value; what then happens is that those who attack are quickly discredited, lacking in any integrity, with no critical acumen, without any knowledge or interest in literary art; therefore their arguments are immediately seen rooted in prejudice, their arguments are shown to have no value whatsoever, they are discredited publicly. In order that this can occur a genuine criticism firstly has to exist and secondly, the public has to have access to it. The stark reality of the horrible attacks on Salman Rushdie is that the literary establishment of this country revealed itself as incapable of offering any defence to its writers.

There are writers here whose work is attacked. The history of the organisation which is hosting this conference is overflowing with silenced voices. Mandela's work remains banned in S.A. If the western powers had wanted an end to the apartheid system 30 years ago then the apartheid system would have ended 30 years ago. Ultimately the motives behind the western powers' open and covert support of apartheid are obvious, profit and self interest, money and power. But it is important here to see the part that a healthy criticism might have played in bringing an end to apartheid. In examining this issue we would also see revealed the infrastructural role that the literary establishment plays in this and the other western powers. The literary establishment of Britain is part and parcel of the elite group who control the country, it is an essential arm of this right wing state; it exists to aid and abet whatever strategies are current. Mainly it plays its part by silencing the opposition, it suppresses and censors. If the literary establishment had been anything other than a state tool it would have played a

crucial role in destabilising the apartheid regime. It would have done this by bringing into the public arena exactly what was happening to the writers and artists. Whereas this would have little or no direct affect on the regime itself, it would have had a tremendous impact on the support given to the regime by the western powers. It should be remembered that the year 1962 is also the year that the literary establishment of this country rose in defence of the work of D H Lawrence. The arguments of those who wanted to suppress Lady Chatterley's Lover were ridiculed publicly, they were shown to be grounded in ignorance and prejudice. The case put by the literary establishment was critical, they held up the arguments of the would-be censors and displayed them for what they were worth, and that worth was critical. This did not happen with Salman Rushdie's novel. The proper critical debate never entered the public domain. Similarly when the posthumous freedom for D H Lawrence was being defended so vigorously the denial of the freedom to work that was occurring so blatantly to the living artists and writers of South Africa was ignored completely. 1962 was a watershed in more ways than one, and nobody here needs reminding about what was going on in South Africa.

adopted seen to bediscredited to the point of ridicule the counFor whatever then it would have endedpointmust be shouted aloud that the shame ofalso to blameis to the shame of this country and the west generally that the various literary eliteshealthy inhave been shown as what they are, cowards. No one wants to